



U.S. ARMY COMBAT READINESS/SAFETY CENTER

4905 5th Ave. Fort Rucker, AL 36362-5363
Comm. (334) 255-3770 Fax (334) 255-2266
<https://safety.army.mil>

Got the message?

Chris Frazier
Directorate of Communication and Public Affairs
U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center
Fort Rucker, Ala.

Rusty Fine's voice trails off as he glances at the projection screen. The photo of a comatose teenager — tubes, wires and machines barely keeping her alive — has temporarily derailed his train of thought. He stares at the image for a second or two more before clearing his throat and continuing with the presentation.

"This is what happens when you text and drive," he says, pointing at the photo. "And it might not be you who dies. What if you killed someone while texting and driving? How would you like to live with that for the rest of your life? That's baggage I wouldn't wish on anyone."

Fine knows the dangers of distracted driving all too well. The girl in the photo was his niece, Megan Warman, a high school senior who died from injuries sustained in an accident in which she was texting and driving.

By all accounts, Megan's life was full of promise. Fine — who along with his wife, Danni Ann, was Megan's legal guardian — said the teen was a Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program recipient. She'd already completed enough credits to graduate from Crestview High School, where she played on the volleyball team, and was dually enrolled at Northwest Florida State College in Niceville. She also managed to hold down jobs at both Little Caesars Pizza and Sonic.

Unfortunately, one bad decision took it all away.

As Megan drove down State Road 85 for night classes at the college, she was texting back and forth with friends. With her attention diverted from driving, she didn't notice the slight curve ahead, and her Chevrolet Cavalier's tires left the roadway. Trying to regain control, she cut the steering wheel back to the right but overcorrected, causing the tires to dig into the soft, sandy roadside. Witnesses told the highway patrol Megan's car flipped as many as seven times before coming to a rest on its roof.

The Fines were alerted of the crash by one of Megan's friends who happened to ride by shortly after it occurred. As the Fines rushed to the scene, they called Megan's cellphone to see if she was all right. A highway patrolman answered the phone and told them they should instead head directly to the hospital in Pensacola, where Megan had been taken via air ambulance. When they arrived, the news they received from doctors was not good.

"They told us she had massive brain trauma," Fine said. "When they found her, she was still strapped in her seat belt, hanging upside down. Basically, she didn't have a scratch on her body, but she'd damaged every lobe of her brain. Even if she were to come out of it, they said she wouldn't have a normal life."

For 10 days, Megan's family held out hope that maybe the doctors were wrong and she would somehow pull through. As that hope began to fade, though, friends and loved ones poured into the hospital to say their final goodbyes. On Feb. 7, 2011, Megan passed away. She was 18.

"We would have never in a thousand years thought this would've happen to Megan," Fine said. "But it did, and it could happen to any family. ... I'd say those 10 days were probably the worst of our lives. It affected everyone she ever knew. And the damage that was inflicted was all preventable."

After Megan's death, Fine was determined to ensure something positive came out of it. So, for the past two years, he has traveled to schools across northwest Florida and south Alabama at his own expense to warn students about the dangers of texting and driving. For a while, he also would haul Megan's mangled car on a flatbed trailer in hopes it would further help drive home his message. Eventually, though, the car, which he stored at his house, became just too painful to keep around, so he had to get rid of it.

Until recently, Fine's presentations had only been given to students. An unlikely pairing with the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center at Fort Rucker, Ala., however, has allowed him to broaden his audience.

It had been only a few months since Megan's death when the team from the USACR/Safety Center's Communication and Public Affairs Directorate approached Fine about participating in a safety video based on the accident. The video tells Megan's story through interviews with Fine and several of the teen's close friends. During the past two years, the video has been viewed thousands of times on the USACR/Safety Center's various social media pages. Fine also hands out copies at speaking engagements and mails them to school administrators across the state in hopes they will eventually be viewed by students.

In an effort to further raise awareness, the USACR/Safety Center recently hosted a distracted driving event on the installation. About 30 Soldiers and civilians were asked to negotiate a one-mile course while encountering distractions they are likely to face when behind the wheel, including text messages, noisy passengers and animals and pedestrians popping up in their lane of travel. After completing the course, the drivers were ushered to a tent to hear Fine's message. A 12-year Air Force veteran, as well as the father of an Airman, Fine holds a special place in his heart for those in the armed forces.

"Texting and driving is not just a high school problem," Fine told the Soldiers. "You risk your lives every day when you are deployed. You don't have to die at home texting and driving. And it's not just your life you're saving; it may be the life of another person on the road."

In addition to his speaking engagements, Fine has spent a great deal of time working to get the state of Florida to pass a distracted driving law. Those efforts were finally realized in May when Gov. Rick Scott signed into law a statewide ban on texting while driving. The law makes it a secondary offense to read or send a text, email or instant message on a cellphone while driving. However, as a secondary offense, police must stop a driver of a primary traffic infraction, such as running a red light, before issuing a ticket for texting while driving.

"I can't say this law would have saved Megan's life for sure, but there's a chance," Fine said. "Megan was someone who, if there was a law, she was going to follow it. That's why she always wore her seat belt."

According to the Governors Highway Safety Association, 41 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands ban text messaging for all drivers. All but four of those states have primary enforcement of the law.

While Fine is happy Florida finally addressed the dangers of texting and driving, he hopes it will one day become a primary offense like the state's seat belt law. Until it does, he plans to keep pushing for the change.

"We can't leave Megan's death as just another teenager killed due to texting and driving," he said. "This was a senseless accident. If my speaking about it saves another family from having to go through this, then it's worth it."